

# CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPT

## Dr. Jared M. McKinney, Dr. Peter Harris, Col. Rich D. Butler, and Josh Arostegui *Deterrence Gap: Avoiding War in the Taiwan Strait (Part 1)*

The likelihood China will attack Taiwan in the next decade is high and will continue to be so, unless Taipei and Washington take urgent steps to restore deterrence across the Taiwan Strait. This monograph introduces the concept of interlocking deterrents, explains why deterrents lose their potency with the passage of time, and provides concrete recommendations for how Taiwan, the United States, and other regional powers can develop multiple, interlocking deterrents that will ensure Taiwanese security in the short and longer terms. By joining deterrence theory with an empirical analysis of Taiwanese, Chinese, and US policies, the monograph provides US military and policy practitioners new insights into ways to deter the People's Republic of China from invading Taiwan without relying exclusively on the threat of great-power war.

In this episode, Dr. Jared M. McKinney, Dr. Peter Harris, Col. Rich D. Butler, and Josh Arostegui discuss *Deterrence Gap: Avoiding War in the Taiwan Strait* and the possible trajectories for China and Taiwan over the coming decades.

**Keywords:** China, Taiwan, deterrence, One China, Chinese Communist Party, Silicon Shield, deterrence theory

E-mail [usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil](mailto:usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil) to give feedback on this podcast or the genesis article.

### Transcript

#### Stephanie Crider (Host)

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This episode is part one of a two-part discussion about the monograph [Deterrence Gap: Avoiding War in the Taiwan Strait](#), which was published by the US Army War College Press in January 2024.

Joining me today are Drs. Jared M. McKinney and Peter Harris along with Colonel Rich D. Butler and Josh Arostegui.

McKinney and Harris are authors of *Deterrence Gap: Avoiding War in the Taiwan Strait*. McKinney is an assistant professor of international security at the Air War College at Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He directs the Taiwan Deterrence Research Task Force at the university. Harris is an associate professor of political science at Colorado State University. He is a nonresident fellow with [Defense Priorities](#).

Butler is the director of the [China Landpower Studies Center](#) in the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College.

Arostegui is the research chair of the China Landpower Studies Center in the [Strategic Studies Institute](#) at the US Army War College.

Welcome to Conversations on Strategy.

Jared and Peter, how do 2027 and 2035 factor into changes in deterrence by denial? You mentioned near-term and 2049 as dangerous times. What about the 2030s?



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**Dr. Jared M. McKinney**

Thanks, Stephanie. I will get us started. Timelines and specific objectives have long been an essential element in [People's Republic of China or] PRC grand strategic thought. And the ultimate objective for the PRC is 2049—the so-called great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and there are subgoals under that rejuvenation. The big goal is to make China proud and strong and an equal of any nation in the world. One of the subgoals, according to authoritative Chinese texts, including the third historical resolution and the 20th [National] Party Congress, is for the unification of China with Taiwan. That, in our view, is a hard, specific objective—something the party wants to accomplish by 2049.

When might it occur? The answer is, nobody knows. However, there are some potential danger spots, and the first of these is centered around 2027—not because there's any definitive proof that there's a PRC plan to invade Taiwan that year but because there's [People's Liberation Army or] PLA modernization objectives intended to have and demonstrate the capability of acting in Taiwan in or around that time.

Between around 2027 and 2049, when might be the most opportune—or, least bad from China's perspective—time to act with regard to Taiwan? And, we argue in *Deterrence Gap* [*Deterrence Gap: Avoiding War in the Taiwan Strait*] that that's going to be in the late 2020s—and probably not the late 2030s or 2040s—because of the shifting balance of power, which we believe, long-term, is in the favor of America, its allies, and partners. But short-term, because there is a deterrence gap, it could potentially be in China's favor.

**Dr. Peter Harris**

I would just add to that—one thing that we try and emphasize in the manuscript—as Jared said, there's no kind of smoking-gun evidence that the PRC has got a specific date in mind for invading Taiwan. The more likely outcome, from our perspective, is that a crisis or series of crises (political crises) in the Taiwan Strait could result in leaders in Beijing judging the time to invade to be propitious. So, what the United States, its allies, and partners in Taiwan need to do is to construct overall security conditions that never make it propitious. The security conditions across the strait could withstand any crisis or series of crises. In the past, that was the case: Taipei, Beijing, and Washington could butt head politically, but leaders in Beijing would still judge an invasion too costly or unlikely to succeed.

The point of our manuscript is that we start to get a lot more pessimistic within the next decade that that will hold—that security conditions would still prohibit an invasion from Beijing's perspective—which would make these kind[s] of recurring crises that happen pretty dangerous. So, the goal for Taiwan especially [and the United States and its allies as well] is to restore deterrence, to rebuild or reinforce deterrence across the strait such that as we look forward five, 10, 15 years into the future, we can be more confident that the political situation can withstand those crises that I think we all should realistically expect to occur. But it's gonna take long-term planning to make sure that they don't boil over into leaders in Beijing judging, "This is the time."

**Josh Arostegui**

I've been tracking these dates for years, and they all line up pretty evenly with certain centennials and everything, but [with] 2035 being the one that was initially pointed out long before 2027 about basically achieving full modernization, which there is some description in those words. But when people asked me, "Was that a reasonable timeline to get there?" Yes, in my opinion it is. But 2027 really speeds up that timeline significantly. I know this is kind of a qualitative question here, but do you guys think that they can get to that point that they are talking about by 2027?

**McKinney**

So, if I just start with 2035, my view is that China's going to miss most of its 2035 objectives. And in fact, the 14th Five-Year Plan was very clear on what a lot of these objectives are, including the doubling of per capita [gross domestic product or] GDP, and current trends suggest it's not possible. And the 2035 economic objectives are going to be missed pretty broadly.

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Then what about the 2027 military objectives? The truth is that it's hard to know what China thinks is sufficient because that's based on China's perceptions of their own power, China's perceptions of Taiwan's power, and China's perceptions of America's power. And I don't know that we have high confidence about what those perceptions are in any of those cases.

**Col. Rich D. Butler**

I share the same optimistic thought that conditions domestically in China begin to inhibit some of the will to want to subsume and digest Taiwan as the 23rd wayward province. And I do think that the trend of senior leadership, beginning with President Xi [Jinping], wanting to be ready by 2027 helpfully indicate that is a marker. He not just wants to go early, but he believes that he needs to have a lot of time to be able to stabilize the entire situation before the rejuvenation is complete from an ideological perspective. Upping our military deterrence with our allies and partners between now and the late 2020s is critical because that sets the tone and tenor for what the government that runs Beijing (the [Chinese] Communist Party and its citizens) choose to believe about what is actually important. And I think that the bandwagoning we're starting to see in the economic lanes—some of the things that Victor Cha points out about how we can do better over the next decade—brings some saliency to the direction that the free world needs to go.

We should maintain optimism because we know central, authoritarian-led governments tend to sometimes hear what they want to hear. I am optimistic, a little bit, for the 2030s, but I do not know if we are on a continually pressurizing glide slope where you have to make the pressure cooker bigger and bigger and bigger to handle the pressure and where we just run out of deterrence because the [Chinese Communist Party or] CCP refuses to change—and they have the agency here. I'm unsure that, as the free world, we could change our view of what we want the free and open order and the rules-based international order to keep going. I am not sure that we can back down from a whole lot of that based on the things the Chinese are trying to do across the levers of military and economic power.

**Harris**

I would echo the great point that was made that we should not be complacent—even if we judge the trends to be not as favorable for China as had previously been thought. It is not a reason for complacency, as I think we all agree. Events have got a habit of intervening. And sometimes during a crisis moment, leaders make decisions on very short time horizons with incomplete information. And, as was discussed, authoritarian leaders, in particular, can be prone to hearing what they want to hear or being told what they want to hear. And bad decisions can be made.

So an expansion of the war in Ukraine [Russia-Ukraine War], a major conflagration in the Middle East, some kind of political crisis in Beijing or Taipei or Washington, any of these kind of unexpected events could put leaders in Beijing in a spot where they have to make a decision—or they feel like they have to make a decision—on whether or not an invasion is a good idea at that particular point in time. And what we need to do is make sure that the security situation across the Taiwan Strait is robust enough so that in any of those moments of crisis, in any of those moments of short-term, urgent decision making, leaders in Beijing would conclude, "No, this is not the right time."

I am not sure, as we edge towards 2035, that Taiwan could be confident that security conditions are robust enough to withstand that kind of stress, and it really needs to be made robust.

**Butler**

You bring up interesting points on perception. If we wanted to induce change in the way the system's sort of working, I think it begins with the fact that both the leadership in Beijing and the citizens of the PRC should realize they are front and center on the world stage. They've achieved so much in the last 40 years. For me, avoiding war and a conflict in the future is really predicated on all parties acknowledging that the PRC is a world leader. In many cases, they are. Look at how far they have come—the size of their economy, the influence that they wield. And if we could get over that hurdle, I think we would be in a healthier place. It is maybe a little Pollyannish, but we are talking about avoiding major peer conflict.

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**Host**

Do you think Lai's win in January will force the US to have to answer that question sooner rather than later? Additionally, at the national policy level, have all parties been pulling the wool over their own eyes regarding the One China policy since its creation? Is it only of consequence now because the CCP has the military and economic power to effect the change that they have always stated?

**Harris**

Thanks, Stephanie. I will start off with this one. I think the One China question of America's stance or policy towards Taiwan's political status is really always at the fore. That is really a major component of this relationship. And certainly from Beijing's perspective, the integrity of America's stance on Taiwan's political status is very important. People in Beijing, they watch for changes in America's One China policy. And any changes in that regard are pretty serious from a political and a security point of view. So, I would say the question of the One China policy is really always at the fore. And the United States, I do not think it should feel forced to answer questions on the One China policy as much as it should recognize that it is in its own interests to make that policy known—widely and clearly—to all parties.

So, while I agree with strategic ambiguity in the military sphere, I think in the political sphere there's a strong case for clarity [and] that the United States should be very clear and unambiguous about what its One China policy is and has been since the late 1970s, early 1980s.

I agree the election of President Lai certainly makes it more important than has previously been the case for the United States to enunciate that policy and make that policy clear and really to stick to that policy. I do not see much evidence that President Lai is planning on making any provocative moves regarding Taiwan's political status. Although, it's true during the campaign, he announced, as a long-term goal; he would like the president of Taiwan to visit the White House. That certainly would be an incendiary move that I think the United States would be wise to avoid.

From the US perspective, I think the One China policy has served the country pretty well. It should stick to its One China policy. I do not see any pressing need to change the One China policy. And President Biden, I think, has done a very good job recently of reasserting the integrity of the One China policy. And I think that's the correct position.

The final think I'd say is the One China policy in the United States, it evolved somewhat organically in the '70s and the '80s. Some parts of the One China policy were put in place by the presidency and the executive branch. Other parts were contributed by Congress. So there's no single architect of the One China policy. It was really a compromise between leaders in Washington just as much as it is a compromise between the United States, the PRC, and Taiwan.

But just because the One China policy emerged in that kind of haphazard way to begin with, it does not mean it is a bad policy. It is a good policy in the sense that it helps to sustain peaceful relations between all parties. So, my view would be leaders in the United States—especially in the White House—should resist efforts to chip away at the One China policy that has been in place since the early '80s and should really be clear/unambiguous that that remains the political foundation of America's approach to the Taiwan question.

**Butler**

There is no good answer to the question. The interpretation by all three governments has been different throughout the duration of the policy. And I agree with Peter that it has served itself very well in the past. It is just going to be challenging going forward, noting that the US's interpretation of strategic ambiguity includes support to maintaining the status quo. At the same time, inside of Taiwan, all three parties are generally coalescing toward status quo plus, maybe, as you watch the policy of the [Democratic Progressive Party or] DPP and the [Nationalist Party or] KMT slowly come together. Because the KMT originally said, "Yeah, we believe in the One China policy, but that means that we retake control of the mainland and the KMT government seats itself."



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Obviously, that has changed. And the DPP started off as a sort of a de facto independence policy, but they have sort of walked their way in and it shows itself through the Tsai [Ing-wen] government. I think for the Lai government, it will endure.

And then the challenge on the agency of the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party, our interpretation is, “It is one country under our control.” And the idea that they were going to be Hong Kong-like I think has certainly gone off the table. So, you have got all these problems so the flexibility and the resiliency of the policy in the future could actually add to the flames and the passions of what each element believes. And that’s the challenge I think we face.

I would encourage some really smart researchers to start looking at that. What is that durability and that flexibility? I generally agree with what Peter stated. But we’re in for some bumpy roads in the coming years on that strategic-ambiguity policy.

**Harris**

In the manuscript, we describe this discourse of One China as a constellation of understandings about Taiwan’s political status. And there is no single idea of One China, as you say. You know, we have in the United States our One China policy, which is fairly concrete. In Taiwan, there’s different understandings of what that concept might mean. And in Beijing, too, there are different understandings. So, I agree, as events happen, as the balance of power shifts, as politics in all three countries kind of moves and evolves over time, there’s a challenge to keep that constellation of understandings from spreading apart.

And there’s a need for adroit diplomacy to at least make sure that everyone’s understanding of this One China idea is sufficient enough to reassure all sides that the status quo is sustainable. We only have sovereignty in the United States over our own foreign policy. Sadly, we can’t control how China views this concept. And I wholeheartedly agree the leaders of Beijing have done enormous disservice to the concept of One China by essentially trashing the idea of one country, two systems.

The way Beijing handled the integration of Hong Kong into the PRC was a massive on goal when it comes to sustaining the viability of One China as a discourse because, quite reasonably, people in Taiwan conclude that One China is now tantamount to the destruction of Taiwanese democracy. Sadly, we have no control over that.

All the United States can do is control its own articulation of what One China means. And I think, we can hopefully all agree that that makes sense—that the policy that’s been in place in Washington for the past four decades makes quite a lot of sense. And hopefully, others will play their own role in maintaining the sustainability of that discourse.

**Butler**

What do you think we should be learning relative to what is going on with Ukraine where we have backed a non-ally and another democracy?

**Harris**

That’s a great question. I am sure there are some things we can learn from the experience of aiding Ukraine. So, as you say, Ukraine and Taiwan have in common that they’re both non-allies of the United States (nontreaty allies), and they’re both democratic. So, just as in Ukraine, the United States would not be obligated to come to the military defense of Taiwan if it was invaded by China. It may choose to, and the Taiwan Relations Act obliges the United States government to maintain that capability. But there would be no obligation—in law—that the United States would have to intervene. There would be, I think, incredible pressure to render assistance to Taiwan, just as the United States has been instrumental in aiding Ukraine’s defense against Russia, largely because it is democratic. The American people do not like to see democracies invaded by the authoritarian aggressors.

The problem, I think, is that is where the similarities end because the Ukraine model might not be exactly replicable in the Taiwan Strait. Namely, supplying Taiwan in a military conflict with China would be much, much harder than

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it has been to supply Ukraine. NATO countries have got land borders with Ukraine. It's relatively easy to get things across that border. Supplying Taiwan by sea or by air would be really dangerous and really difficult in the context of a war. My guess would be, that US decisionmakers would have to think a lot harder and a lot longer about whether or not that was a step the US was willing to take. And things would depend on any number of factors when that decision was made.

**Host**

In past interviews, Lai noted that building up Taiwan's deterrence was critical and that he intended to transform Taiwan's military to an asymmetric fighting force with greater survivable, agile, and cost-effective capabilities. Your monograph recommended such a deterrence concept—especially since it could enable the US to focus its own strategy in making systems available to Taiwan through the sale, or licensed production in Taiwan, of Stingers and Javelins. This concept could arm Taiwan with capable systems at less cost and far more rapidly than traditional weapons sales of naval and air systems. And, as you note, ground forces have a strong chance of inflicting heavy losses on the PLA. Would this action likely serve a different purpose in speeding up the closure of China's window of opportunity?

**McKinney**

Broadly speaking, Taiwan needs to transition its strategy from a utilization of force on and around Taiwan's immediate vicinity away from the old power-projection model of resisting the enemy on the other shore and attacking the enemy at sea and transition it towards destroying the enemy in the littoral area, annihilating the enemy on the beachhead, and then probably some new objectives. Fighting the enemy in cities is what I would say—and resisting the enemy from the mountains. And these are explicitly Landpower-centric objectives. Urban combat and mountain resistance would absolutely require soldiers, marines, special operators. With proper training and equipment, they would own these missions. And in the past, it's not been popular to talk about on-island combat because the reality is it would be painful and destructive. And that is, of course, true. But resisting on the China side of the strait, or in the strait, is less realistic due to PRC technological dominance. What this means is that Taiwan is going to have to embrace the pain levers it has available in order to develop a robust deterrent. So, that's broadly speaking, gonna require transitioning from a deterrence-by-denial in the strait strategy to a deterrence-by-punishment on island strategy. And there's good evidence that the PLA is not prepared for and does not want urban combat, and deterrence is about threatening your adversary with something they fear. Landpower plays a big role in that. But to your point, would developing a more robust Landpower-centered strategy create time pressures for PLA action? My view is if we go back to that 2027 to 2049 framework, basically anything you can do between now and 2027 is free deterrence because pretty clearly the PLA is not prepared literally right now.

And so, there is no time pressure from acting right now. The actual time pressure comes from let us say 2028, or so, on. And acting in that window then could be creating a more robust deterrent for the future at a time in which the PLA is prepared—or closer to prepared—for the present. My answer would be there is this deterrence gap, and we need to act very swiftly to close it. And that means investing in the right weapons at the right place, which is on Taiwan, and ensuring that they match a realistic strategy, which can't be destroying the PLA in the strait because it's not realistic as a winning strategy anymore but probably centered on a deterrence-by-punishment on-island strategy.

**Harris**

I would add, the overarching point from our perspective is that what's needed is these multiple, overlapping deterrents to deter China from invading Taiwan. And from Taiwan's perspective, the more autonomous deterrents that it can wield, the better. I think it is reasonable for people in Taiwan to base part of their expectations on the hope or the expectation that the United States and its allies might intervene [and] other powers around the world might impose economic or political sanctions on Beijing. But the more that Taiwan can have autonomy over its own military and economic deterrence, the better.

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And this is one way, a very good, strong, credible, and severe threat that Taiwan can make against the PLA is that we will fight you on Taiwan, and we will inflict terrible costs upon you such that it becomes irrational for you to attempt to subdue us.

It's also consistent with existing political arrangements. So, the Taiwan Relations Act obliges the US government to make arms sales and the like to Taiwan. So, it does not upset the status quo in that regard. People in Beijing may be extremely vexed and unhappy with the United States supplying arms to Taiwan to make ready this kind of deterrent, but it would not be a departure from the status quo. And in that sense, it is less likely to provoke a crisis or cause instability or provoke the war that it intends to forestall.

**Butler**

People call it the hedgehog strategy and have for years. The government and the military and the citizens have to embrace it. The idea that there's a defense in depth that can be done with all kinds of newer and lower-cost capabilities from better land-based anti-ship missiles, mines, air defense capabilities, beach-laid mines, a force that can reconstitute because the Taiwan reserve is capable of reconstituting army troop strength and supplying itself as you fight off the beaches. And frankly, if you look at World War II, one of the reasons we did not choose to invade Formosa was because the [US] Army and Marine Corps, in their studies, said that it would take too much time and effort and energy to try to stabilize all of the island after it had been invaded because the terrain can be used to their geographic advantage.

It is different than the idea that Mao (Zedong) had for "lure them in deep" because you cannot lure them in deep. But the mobility of the terrain across the island is such that you can canalize everybody pretty quickly and really slow things down. And they have got to be able to think that way. And I think that plays into what the PLA Army believes they could potentially do and where they start having trouble being able to reconstitute themselves—particularly as more support would come to Taiwan's assistance. Taiwan has to be in a position where they can't culminate early. Otherwise, you are just sending the wrong signal to the PLA and the CCP.

**Arostegui**

I want to thank you guys for obliging us and answering that question. I really wanted to try and put something in here that took directly from your fantastic text but also was relevant to our new China [Landpower Studies] Center's mission and scope. It is interesting because the US has always had that perspective of the (United States Indo-Pacific Command or) INDOPACOM area of responsibility being more of the naval and air domains, for obvious reasons. But understanding the application of Landpower from China and Taiwan's side is pretty important to this conversation. It is interesting because we still continue to look at selling fighter jets and everything else, but then in addition, tanks. Yes, Landpower is great, but I really like the point that you guys took here, which was, hey, these lighter, more mobile systems that could be highly effective in their employment in the mountains or in urban terrain—I think you are spot on. And I think you are right that China is terrified of that because they are just not prepared to operate in large cities

**McKinney**

Our overall summary, which we can talk more about, is really mines, missiles, and drones, and, at scale, attritable, diffused, resilient, able to still be utilized in a communication-denied environment. I mean, Ukraine is talking about building or acquiring one million drones in 2024, and that's the sort of scale we realistically need to be talking about—not 100 this or 50 that. We need to be talking thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands.

**Butler**

If you add those new, less expensive, really easy-to-produce capabilities at scale, New Taipei and Taipei City as modern cities, number one, can take a lot of artillery damage. This isn't built like Gaza. The other thing is that large, twenty-first-century cities swallow armies because of the personnel requirements to control every single block

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will consume manpower and start making it untenable for control based on the number of troops that the Chinese may be able to send, assuming that you have attrited them all the way through the landing campaign. So, it creates an awful big problem.

**Host**

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